TJ KLUNE

LOVESONG

Lovesong

A Green Creek Story

By TJ Klune

Author's Note: This is part of a series meant to be read in order, starting with Wolfsong followed by Ravensong. If you haven't read both books, this will spoil major events. You've been warned.

packpackpack

i.

When she dreams these days, it’s always in shades of blue.

She’s in an endless forest. The trees stretch toward the starry sky. She feels the cool grass beneath her bare feet. The moon is bright. It’s full, of course.

She’s not alone.

She can’t see him, but she knows he’s there. She hears him breathe.

She turns her head to look for him, but there’s nothing but a flash of white disappearing into the woods.

When she wakes, her face is wet.

ii.

The first time he makes her laugh is when he tells her he thinks she’s pretty.

She laughs at him. It isn’t cruel. She’s shocked. It’s startled out of her, and she can’t stop it, even if she tries.

He’s not hurt by it.

He laughs too, blushing as he looks away.

iii.

When she’s pregnant with their first, he turns into a possessive asshole. He growls low in his throat at anyone who touches her belly.

When she’s had enough, she smacks him upside the head and tells him to knock it off.

He blinks in surprise, the orange light fading in his eyes.

“Sorry,” he says, sounding sheepish. “I don’t know why I do that.”

She takes his hand and presses it against her stomach. For a moment, nothing happens.

She winces when she feels him kick (*Carter*, she’s already thinking , *Carter, Carter, Carter*), but any discomfort falls away at the look on his face.

He’s awestruck.

iv.

When death comes for them, it’s swift and brutal. She’s in the Bennett pack, yes, and she’s the mate to a future Alpha, but she is a mother first, and her instincts are to protect her unborn child.

She kills that day. She takes the lives of at least six people who have come to their territory with anger in the hearts and bullets of silver. The first is a large man standing above a dead wolf, one of the little cousins. He doesn’t see her coming. Her jaws close around his neck and she *twists*, the bones cracking under her fangs.

The last person she kills is a woman. She raises her gun toward the once and future king.

She doesn’t get a chance to pull the trigger.

There isn’t much left of her by the time Elizabeth Bennett finishes.

When all that’s left is smoke and memory, she feels it.

All that they’ve lost.

It’s Richard Collins who notices first.

She doesn’t understand him. She never has. There’s always been something… *off*, but Thomas laughed and told her she was seeing things.

When her mate howls, there’s a change in the cadence. And that’s when it hits her.

Thomas Bennett looks at her with bloodred eyes.

v.

Carter comes, and there’s pain, bright and glassy. It’s *real*, and she feels it with a primal satisfaction as it tears through her. This is *her* pain, this belongs to *her*, and no one can take it away. She relishes in it as sweat drips from her brow.

They’re few, now.

Their pack.

But she hears them whispering in her head, and it’s *love* and *strength* and *yes yes yes*.

And with a cry of relief that sounds like a song, the boy comes into the world.

The first.

But not the last.

vi.

They’re making a mistake.

She knows they are.

She tells Thomas as much.

“How can we do this to him?” she asks. “How can this be all right?”

Thomas rubs a hand over his face. He’s tired. He’s got bags under his eyes and a few days’

worth of stubble on his cheeks. He was always going to be the Alpha, but it happened much sooner than anyone would have expected. She thinks he would give it all up just to have their pack again.

He’s a good man, but right now, she doesn’t understand him.

“We have to keep him safe,” he says with that familiar stubborn set to his jaw that she loves and despises in equal measure. “It’ll be better for him if he stays here. The wolves… they don’t trust the humans. Especially *this* human. They think…they think Robert did something to him. To his tattoos. A fail safe. Just in case.”

“You can fight for him,” she says. “He’s not like his father. If you do this, you will put him on the path that you’ll regret in time.”

She’s never been demure. She’s seen other mates to Alphas, subservient and quiet. That was never her. If Thomas asked that of her, demanded her silence, she would tear him limb from limb.

But she’s going to lose this one.

And what’s worse is that she’s going to follow him.

She doesn’t know what that makes them.

Doesn’t know what that makes *her*.

“I know that,” Thomas says, sounding tired. “But they don’t. And I have a duty, Lizzie. An obligation. My father….” He shakes his head. “I am the Alpha of all. I don’t have a choice.”

She wants to tell him he does. He could give it up, let someone else worry about the fate of the wolves. She wants to tell him they can't do this. They can't break apart their pack. Not after everything.

But she doesn't.

And she will regret it for the rest of her life.

"This is going to destroy Mark," she says quietly. "He'll never agree."

Thomas's eyes flare red. "He will. I am his Alpha. He'll do what I tell him to."

"And then he'll never forgive you."

The redness disappears, and all she feels is blue. It's an ocean of sorrow, and she knows how much this is hurting him. It's still no excuse. "I know," he says. "But I have no other choice."

She loves him, but she thinks he's a liar.

vii.

Kelly is… different. He's quieter. He comes early, and it's over quicker than she expects.

There's pain, but it's not like it was with Carter.

He doesn't cry.

She thinks something is wrong.

But he's breathing and blinking up at her as he's placed in her arms.

"Hello," she says. "Hello, my little child."

viii.

With Joe, things change.

She can’t quite tell how she knows, but even in the womb, it’s not like it was with Carter and Kelly. There’s a sense of something more. She feels guilty about thinking that way, and it’s not until she speaks with Thomas that she understands.

“Alpha,” he says simply. “I think this one is meant to be the Alpha. Richard thinks so too.”

And oh god, that terrifies her.

ix.

When Joe is returned to them, he doesn’t speak. His eyes are vacant, and he doesn’t respond.

She doesn’t know what to do.

She hates Richard for what he’s done.

She hates Thomas for allowing it to happen.

She hates the wolves in this place. It’s not home. Maine was never going to be home, and now one of her sons is hollowed out and dark. She thinks about taking them and running far, far away.

She doesn’t.

She kisses his cheeks.

The tip of his nose.

His chin.

Carter and Kelly curl around him.

But it’s like he’s gone.

She doesn’t know how to get him back.

x.

It’s all candy canes and pinecones.

Epic and awesome.

It’s *boom* and *rawr*.

It’s a strange boy named Ox.

She doesn’t know what to make of him.

She loves him, though. Almost right away.

And for that reason alone, she wants to keep him away.

Death, she thinks as she listens to her son speak for the first time since he was returned to them, always comes for the wolves.

And when Joe comes to her, when he says he wants to give Ox his stone wolf, she *agrees*, knowing how manipulative it will be. Ox doesn’t know the truth. He doesn’t know what it means. But her son is speaking, and his eyes have life in them, so much life that she can’t deny him anything.

She doesn’t sleep much that night.

xi.

She starts painting again.

It’s angry at first. Savage. Harsh lines and slashes of color.

It doesn’t feel like enough.

xii.

She doesn’t tell them where she’s going. They’re distracted. All the kids are in school. Mark and Thomas are on conference calls in the office.

She walks into town. The forest smells like it always has. The dirt road crunches under her feet.

She thinks of what she'll say.

Of what she'll do.

She doesn't know how he'll react.

GORDO'S, the sign says.

She smiles to herself.

There's no one at the front desk.

She rings the bell and waits.

It's discordant, the first time she sees him. He's not like he was. He's harder. She thinks he hates her, and she deserves it.

His tattoos flash.

"Gordo," she says, and is surprised when her voice cracks.

His eyes darken. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

She says, "I'm sorry. For all that we did to you."

"Fuck you. Get the fuck outta here."

She nods. "Joe, he…."

"Thomas already told me. I said no."

She says, "Thomas never took another witch. They asked. They begged. He told them no. He told them he already had a witch."

It's unfair of her. To do this. To *say* this. It's calculating, and she can see the moment it lands.

His expression stutters before he looks at her coldly. “I don’t care.”

“It was wrong,” she says, and she wants to touch him. To take his face in her hands and smooth out the angry lines. “What we did to you. We were young. And scared.”

“You’re only saying this because you need me to help out with Joe,” he snaps at her. “Where were you before this? Years, Elizabeth. It’s been *years*.”

“So many times,” she says. “So many times I picked up the phone, wanting to hear your voice.

But I—”

He laughs, and it’s the bitterest sound she’s ever heard. “But you didn’t. Out of sight, out of mind.”

Yes. That’s exactly what it was. And the truth hurts. “We… made mistakes.”

“Fuck you. And fuck your mistakes.”

She doesn’t know this man. This furious man. She doesn’t know him, and it’s all her fault.

“Mark—”

“Don’t,” he snarls at her. “Don’t you say his name.”

She blinks as she takes a step back. “I’m sorry. I just….” She shakes her head. “I love you. I don’t expect you to believe me. And I understand why you wouldn’t. But I love you, Gordo. I do.”

He laughs, and oh the hatred she hears in his voice. It’s like poison. “Yeah, you sure showed me just how much you loved me. All of you did.”

She turns to leave, not wanting him to see her cry.

She stops when he says, “Ox.”

She swallows thickly, looking out the front of the shop to the street.

He says, “Leave him out of this.”

“I think it’s already too late,” she whispers.

“Already got your claws in him,” Gordo says in a dead voice. “Of course you did. Wolves ruin everything they touch. I won’t let you do that to him.”

She doesn’t look back.

xiii.

In the end, though, he comes.

She wonders why.

She doesn’t know if she’d do the same if she were in his position.

Joe is trapped in his shift. Not quite boy, not quite wolf.

And Gordo comes.

She’s a wolf, and her instincts have kicked into overdrive.

She snarls at him.

He rolls his eyes.

Thomas says, “Ox. He needs Ox.”

Gordo’s shoulders sag in defeat.

xiv.

Later she’ll find out he told the boy that it’s real.

That monsters are real.

That it’s *all real*.

He’s right, of course.

Elizabeth knows monsters.

xv.

Maggie Callaway is a wonderful woman.

She’s fierce.

And smart.

And stronger than she gives herself credit for.

When they meet for the first time, Elizabeth understands then just how someone like Ox can exist. It’s because of his mother.

And they grow to be friends, Maggie and Elizabeth. She hasn’t had a woman as a friend in a long time. It’s… nice having someone like her. Someone who doesn’t quite realize Elizabeth is essentially a queen. It’s easier that way.

When she finds out they’re wolves, Maggie is shocked.

But it only lasts for a day or two.

She comes to the house one day not long after.

They sit at the kitchen table, sunlight coming in through the window. It’s just the two of them.

Elizabeth relishes this contact. Is hungry for it.

Maggie says, “He’s part of this, isn’t he?”

Elizabeth nods slowly. “I think so.”

Maggie curls her hands around her mug of tea. “He’s special.”

“I know.”

“A mother always thinks that about her child. But….”

“It’s more than that with Ox.”

She looks away. “His father never thought so.”

“His father was wrong.”

Maggie nods. “Why? Do you know? Does Thomas?”

No. They don’t. But it’s there all the same. She reaches out and touches Maggie’s wrist. She’s not quite pack—not yet, at least, not like Ox is—but Elizabeth can’t ignore instinct. She’s pleased with her scent being on this wonderful woman. “He’s going to do great things, your Ox.”

Maggie smiles. It trembles to the point of breaking. “He doesn’t hear that enough. I try to make him understand.” She hesitates. Then, “Ox tells me you’re a painter.”

Elizabeth blinks. “I am.”

Maggie seems shy when she says, “That’s so nice. Do you think… do you think I could see? I don’t know anything about art, but I know pretty things when I see them.”

They spend the rest of the day together.

When Maggie is murdered in their territory, Elizabeth is close to tearing the world apart.

xvi.

It’s quick when it happens.

One moment she’s snarling, her tail twitching, her teeth stained with Omega blood.

And the next, it breaks within her like glass, the shards embedded in her skin.

Her breath leaves her body like she’s been kicked in the stomach.

She takes a stumbling step forward, her wolf mind thinking *no* and *mate* and *Thomas Thomas Thomas*.

She runs faster than she’s ever run before.

But she’s too late.

Joe is on his knees, his head tilted back.

His eyes are filled with fire.

He is the Alpha.

Which means—

xvii.

They come from far away.

Michelle Hughes doesn’t.

Elizabeth is thankful for that. She doesn’t know what she’d do if Michelle showed her face in Green Creek. She’s jumbled up with Osmond and Richard Collins in Elizabeth’s mind, and even if that’s not fair, that’s how it is.

She is the wolf mother. Those who come to pay their respects are in awe of her. She accepts their condolences. They touch her hand and her shoulders. She’s barely able to keep from recoiling.

They leave her be… before.

Alone. With him.

Thomas has been bathed, the blood washed away.

His skin is pale.

She says, “How could you leave me like this?”

She says, “I hate you.”

She says, “Oh, oh, oh.”

She says, “We were young once. And you were smiling. I remember that. Your eyes were wide, and you said you had something to offer me. I knew what it was, and even though I was scared, I knew it was right. That I would say yes. Because there was no one else for me. There never has been. And you… you left me here. Why?”

He doesn’t answer.

He can’t.

He’s gone, gone, gone.

She closes her eyes, trying to find him. Trying to search along the bonds that stretch between them all. If he’s there, even the smallest part of him, she would know. Especially in this place.

It’s different here. Stronger. More powerful. Her mother told her when she was a child that all those who leave are never truly gone.

But she can’t find him.

There’s a ragged, gaping hole where he should be.

xviii.

He burns in the forest at night.

The wolves sing their songs for the fallen king.

Hers is an aria of blue.

xix.

After, always after:

They break apart.

Three years.

One month.

Twenty-six days.

And for the first part of it, she knows only the wolf. It’s not fair of her, to be so lost in her grief.

She has a pack. She has her sons. But when they leave, she doesn’t know how to handle it.

Before they leave, she tells Gordo she’ll kill him if anything happens to them under his watch.

She’s lying.

She’s tired of death.

She wants to tell him she loves him. That Thomas loved him.

But she can’t make the words come out.

That’s on her.

She is wrong in this.

But Gordo is gone.

Not long after, she shifts and doesn’t turn back for months.

xx.

Alpha, she tells Oxnard Matheson, and she’s never meant it more.

xxi.

When her sons return to her, she doesn’t recognize them.

Oh, she knows their scent. She can feel them along the bonds, but it’s *different*.

They’re men now. Harder than they’ve ever been before.

But it’s not until she has Carter and Kelly in her arms that she knows they’re still her children.

“Mom,” they whisper against her neck. “Mom. Mom. Mom.”

“My boys,” she whispers back. “I love you so.”

xxii.

She stares down at the headless body of Richard Collins.

She should be filled with rage.

She’s not.

It’s only sadness.

She says, “You took much from me. From us. But you were just lost, I think. You were never going to win.”

It’s not forgiveness.

But it’s something.

xxiii.

Grief is a funny thing. There are days when it feels like it’s fading, like it’s nothing more than a low buzz at the back of her mind.

But then one little thing can set it off all over again.

She’s in the office, dusting the bookshelves. It’s mundane. It’s easy. It allows her mind to wander. Richard has been dead for six months, and she’s learning how to just *be* again. She smiles more these days. She laughs sometimes. Her pack is strong, and the wolf mother is proud.

Green Creek is settling once again, and though she knows it might not last, it’s enough for now.

She’s startled out of her thoughts when she feels him.

It’s as if he’s standing right there.

She can smell him, and it’s *woodsmoke* and *pine* and *pitch*.

She whirls around.

There’s no one there.

Except….

There’s a book on the floor.

She says, “Is that you, dear? Please.”

There’s no response.

She lowers herself to the floor next to the book. It’s old. The cover is blank. It takes her a moment to recognize it for what it is.

When he was courting her, he would read poetry to her. He thought it was romantic. She thought it was ridiculous, but she loved him for it.

His favorite poet was Pablo Neruda. Because of course it was. The patron saint of pretty words.

She picks up the book from the floor.

There’s a piece of paper inside.

She opens the book.

She sees the poem printed on the page.

…something started in my soul,

fever or forgotten wings,

and I made my own way,

deciphering

that fire,

and I wrote the first faint line,

faint, without substance, pure

nonsense,

pure wisdom,

of someone who knows nothing,

and suddenly I saw

the heavens

unfastened

and open…

It was one of the first he’d read to her.

She laughed at him, feeling her face warm. But he was so earnest about it, so—

And *oh*, here it is again, this grief. *Here* it is, biting and clawing and tearing, saying *I was always here, I've never left, and I am going to consume you*.

She can barely breathe.

The book falls back to the floor.

The piece of paper inside falls out.

The smell of him is stronger than ever.

It's *choking* her.

"What's this?" she asks, and if she listens hard enough, she thinks she hears him say, *My love, my wife, it's all that remains*.

She picks it up, hands shaking.

It's a single page, and when she opens it, she sees it's dated.

A week before he died.

She doesn't want to read it.

She does anyway.

And in that familiar scrawl, it says:

To my beloved:

I am not a perfect man. I have made mistakes. Many, many mistakes. I regret most of them. I did what I thought was right, and hindsight is proving me wrong.

But none of these regrets are you.

You have made this life worth living.

You have given me a family.

You have given me a home.

I don't know what the future holds. I don't know what will happen. But I know that our pack is strong, and we will face whatever comes.

I don't know what I'd do without you.

You keep me honest.

You keep me whole.

You don't let me get away with anything (even when I want you to!) Everything good in me is because of you.

And here, on our anniversary, I want you to know that I And that's all there is.

It's unfinished.

She reads it again and again and again, and when she finally looks back up, the smell of woodsmoke and pine and pitch has faded.

xxiv.

There is a door.

A door to everything.

xxv.

It begins to build again.

She thinks the territory is cursed.

That all they will ever do is fight.

For a brief moment, she wonders if it’s worth it.

But it’s fleeting.

Because she is a wolf mother.

And she will do everything she can to protect what’s hers.

xxvi.

When she loses Carter to the Omega within him, when Mark shifts, eyes violet and bright, she understands real hatred.

She *hates* those who want to take from her.

xxvii.

There is a door.

It’s in Ox’s mind.

And it needs to be shattered.

So they do just that.

She sees him, briefly, sitting in front of the door. His fur is white and his eyes are red, and she hears Gordo say *oh*, but this moment isn’t just for her.

It’s for all of them.

And it tears at her.

In her head, there is a flash— *PackLoveWifeBrotherSon*—but it’s gone before she can grasp it.

The door breaks apart.

xxviii.

There is an ending.

But it only leads to a new beginning.

They are now at war.

Robert Livingstone will rise.

Michelle Hughes has made her choice.

And the Bennett pack will answer in kind.

She watches from the porch of the house at the end of the lane as the Omegas gather nervously, looking frightened and unsure.

Carter grumbles when the timber wolf follows him wherever he goes, growling at anyone who tries to come close. She wonders how long it’ll take for him to figure it out. She laughs when

Carter snaps at the wolf, telling it to fuck off. The wolf ignores her son as it presses up against him. Carter doesn't push it away.

Kelly and Robbie are sitting side by side on the porch steps. Kelly glances at Robbie before looking away quickly. Robbie does the same a moment later. Their gazes never meet. She’s reminded of her and Thomas. Robbie is a good man. Kelly is very lucky.

Rico, Chris, and Tanner are working on Ox’s truck. They jostle each other as they curse at the engine. Chris and Tanner are healing. They’re so fragile. She wonders if they’ll ever take the bite. It’s their choice, but she needs to convince them. She doesn’t know if it’s her place.

Mark and Gordo are walking back from the blue house. Mark reaches out and takes Gordo’s remaining hand in his. She thinks Gordo will pull away. He doesn’t. The raven on Mark’s throat seems to flutter its wings.

Ox and Joe stand before the Omegas. They’re speaking quietly, their voices soft but exuding undeniable power. The Omegas stare up at them reverently.

“It’s the calm before the storm, isn’t it?” Jessie asks from beside her.

Elizabeth glances at her. “Yes.”

Jessie nods, looking out at their pack. “Is it always going to be this way?”

Yes. “I don’t know.”

Jessie reaches over and takes her hand. Elizabeth squeezes it gratefully. Jessie says, “It doesn’t matter.”

“It doesn’t?”

Jessie shakes her head. “We’re going to be here. No matter what. Always. We’re pack.”

Elizabeth believes her.

xxix.

That night, they sleep together in the living room, the couches pushed back and blankets and pillows spread out on the floor. The Omegas are in the basement, resting calmly knowing their Alpha just above them.

“I’m not going to get naked,” Rico tells them seriously. “Last time I did that, Carter grabbed my junk in his sleep, and I don’t want Bambi to kick his ass for touching what belongs to her.”

“Oh please,” Carter snaps. “You *wish* I would touch your junk.”

“He’s like twice your age,” Chris tells him. “You could call him Daddy if you really wanted.”

“*Papi*,” Rico says with a sniff. “You would call me *papi*.”

“So gross,” Kelly whispers as he lies against his brother. The timber wolf growls, but Carter slaps him across the head, and it subsides. It lays down next to Carter, even as he sighs.

“Does Bambi call you *papi*?” Tanner asks. Then he grimaces. “You know what? Don’t answer that, I don’t want to know.”

“Oh, she calls me a lot more than that. Screams it, even—”

“I could call her and ask her,” Jessie says, settling down next to Elizabeth. “Find out what she thinks.”

“No,” Rico says quickly. “Absolutely no need to do that. In fact, let’s never talk to her about anything I say when she’s not here, because of… reasons.”

“We have our own house,” Gordo grumbles to Mark. “I don’t know why we just don’t go there.”

“You like having sleepovers,” Robbie tells him. “Even though you complain and make that face and—”

“I will light you on fire,” Gordo threatens. “And break your fucking glasses.”

“All bark and no bite,” Mark says, kissing the side of his head.

Gordo rolls his eyes but doesn’t argue further.

Ox and Joe are in the middle. Their hearts are beating in sync, and it flows through all of them.

Elizabeth is beginning to drift off when—

“Everyone in town thinks we have orgies,” Rico says, apropos of nothing. “And I don’t tell them otherwise. Just so you all know.”

There are shouts of horror that lead to a pillow fight.

Elizabeth closes her eyes and smiles.

xxx.

When she dreams these days, it’s always in shades of blue.

She’s in an endless forest. The trees stretch toward the starry sky. She feels the cool grass beneath her bare feet. The moon is bright. It’s full, of course.

She’s not alone.

She can’t see him, but she knows he’s there. She hears him breathe.

She turns her head to look for him, but there’s nothing but a flash of white disappearing into the woods.

Except this time, when she wakes, her face isn’t wet.

She looks to her pack.

They’re sleeping deeply, all tangled together.

She—

Woodsmoke.

Pine.

Pitch.

She sits up.

There is a lovesong howling in her head.

She stands slowly.

She hears the clicking of nails on the porch outside, the wood creaking.

As if a heavy animal is pacing in front of the door.

She steps over the others carefully. She takes the shawl hanging from a hook next to the door and wraps it around her shoulders.

She takes a deep breath.

And opens the door.

The porch is empty.

The air is cold as she steps out of the house, closing the door behind her.

She listens.

And in the distance, there is a whisper.

It says, *Something started in my soul, fever or forgotten wings, and I made my own way, deciphering that fire.*

She steps off the porch.

The grass is cool under her bare feet.

The stars above are bright. The moon is almost full. It pulls at her.

But she doesn’t shift.

The trees sway as she walks through the forest.

She thinks that she will decipher that fire.

Here. At last.

Because grief is fire. It burns until all that remains are charred bones of a life that used to be.

She’s not alone as she walks. She can’t see them, but she can feel them.

She comes to the clearing.

Here, once, a boy told her he loved her.

Here, once, she kissed him.

Here, once, he kissed her.

And here, once, he burned as the songs howled him home.

After he was nothing but ash, when his embers had cooled, she'd returned alone, an old stone wolf in her hands.

She'd dug through ash and dirt.

She'd buried the stone wolf there, deep in the earth.

And there it remained.

Except—

She sits in the middle of the clearing and waits.

The lovesong is roaring through her.

She doesn't wait long.

She sees orange eyes in the trees around her. Dozens of them.

Hundreds.

They pace through the trees, never coming closer.

They are protecting her here.

She knows many of them.

The ones she doesn't know came before her, but they are hers all the same.

She sees a flash of red, but it's not the one she's waiting for.

"Abel," she whispers, and the wolf howls.

She closes her eyes.

There's a puff of hot air against her face.

She smiles.

“Hello, dear,” she says, and her voice breaks.

She opens her eyes.

Before her stands a great white wolf.

In his jaws, he holds a stone wolf.

He lays it down gently at her feet. He nudges it toward her.

Here he is, once again, giving it to her.

“I buried it,” she tells him. “Because I thought it was a piece of me for you to take wherever you’d gone.”

He snorts and shakes his head, eyes bright. He sits on his hindquarters, towering over her. She tilts her head back to look up at him. He presses his snout against her forehead, and she says,

“*Oh*.”

There are bright flashes of light.

She hears his voice.

He says, “I’m sorry. For everything. That I had to leave you. That I had to leave our family. I never wanted to. All I ever wanted was to be with you. You are the moon. You pull at me. You make me howl. You make me sing.”

And suddenly I saw the heavens unfastened and open.

He says, “I have loved you since I’ve known you. And I will love you forever.”

The lights grow brighter. It’s blue like sadness, but there is the sweet green of relief shot through it, and she knows that no matter what happens next, she will have had this moment.

The lights fade.

And there before her sits Thomas Bennett. He’s nude, and his skin is unmarked. Death has healed him.

The cry of joy she gives echoes around them. The wolves in the trees sing out in response.

She tackles him.

He laughs.

His skin is warm.

His arms wrap around her.

He kisses her cheeks.

The tip of her nose.

The top of her head.

He’s strong.

And vital.

And—

“This is a dream,” she whispers against the hollow of his throat.

“It’s close to one,” he says into her hair. “You’re asleep with our pack. You are safe and sound.

But this… this is a gift. It’s a gift from our territory, for all that we’ve been through. One last chance until we meet again.”

She allows herself to break.

He holds her as she sobs.

His voice is rough when he says, “Hey. Oh, Lizzie. Hey. Shush. None of that.”

Her chest hitches as she lifts her head.

His smile shakes. His eyes are wet.

She has so much to say.

So much to tell him.

She decides on “You fucking *asshole*.”

He blinks in surprise as she smacks his chest. “Hey! That hurts!”

“I don’t *care*,” she growls at him, feeling her teeth lengthen. “You—you *bastard*.”

She gives in to her rage.

He takes it, for a little while at least. After a time, he grabs her hands and holds them tightly.

“Would you stop it?”

“Why?” she demands. “Why did you do what you did? Why did you have to leave us? Leave *me*?”

He sighs as he lets his head rest against the grass. He’s still holding her wrists, and she marvels at how real it feels. He says, “An Alpha is a leader, but even more so, a protector. In the end, he or she puts their pack above all others. An Alpha will do anything to keep their people safe.”

Oh, she’s heard that time and time again, hasn’t she? Of course she has. Being the mate of an Alpha saw to that.

She slides off, lying on the grass next to him. He lets her go. She turns her head to press her forehead against his shoulder. She breathes him in. “I wish you never….”

“Became the Alpha?”

“Yes.”

“I know.

“It’s not fair.”

“I know that too. But look at what you’ve made for yourself.” He laughs quietly. “This… pack of ours. The wolves. The humans. They’re strong.” His laughter fades. “And they’ll have to be. All of you will. Because of what’s coming.”

She closes her eyes. “Can you tell me what it is?”

“I don’t know.” He sounds frustrated. “It’s… a feeling. A storm. It’s on the horizon. Everything will change. For you. For all the wolves. Ox….” She feels him shake his head. “It’s lost in the storm. He’s important. All of you are important.” And then he whispers, “Robbie will…” but nothing follows.

She asks him what he means.

He doesn’t know.

“It’s not fair,” she says again, unable to keep the bitterness from her voice. “Why does it have to be us?”

“Because of who you are,” he says quietly. “You are the Bennett pack. And your song will always be heard.”

The wolves around them begin to whisper through the bonds.

They say *pack* and *pack* and *pack*.

She listens.

He sits up, head cocked.

And then he says, “Chase me. I love you, chase me.”

He shifts, the grind of muscle and bone loud in the clearing.

She doesn’t think twice.

She shifts too.

They run together in the woods. She nips at his heels. At the tip of his tail. He snaps playfully back at her, weaving in and out of the trees. She runs, he runs, they run together, and it’s like it used to be, before. When they were young and had nothing to be afraid of. She hears him laughing in her head, and it’s so happy and bright that it makes her heart thrum.

The other wolves run around them, always just out of sight. She feels them, recognizes them, bright sparks in the darkness that she hasn’t felt since the hunters came and took them all away.

They run.

They all run.

He says, *LoveWifeMate*

He says, *you are here you are here you are here* He says , *i am too and no matter where you go*

He says, *no matter what you do*

He says, *i will always be with you because i love you i love you i love you* She sings her lovesong into the trees and sky, and it’s blue and green and the territory around her quakes with the power of her voice.

Green Creek shudders and shakes with her call.

Toward the end, the wolves around them begin to fade.

They’re not gone, just… returned to the earth.

To the moon.

She knows she doesn’t have much time.

She shifts, panting as she falls to her hands and knees.

She looks up as the white wolf turns to her.

She whispers, “I forgive you.”

And she means it.

He tilts his head back and howls.

It echoes through the woods.

In it, she hears *keep them safe keep them safe and tell them tell them tell them their father loves them and and and we will be together again one day one day we will be together and we will run as packpackpack.*

And then he steps forward and presses his snout against her forehead and she says, “*Oh*.”

The world explodes around her.

xxxi.

She opens her eyes.

She’s in the house.

Her pack breathes deeply around her.

It was a dream.

It was all a dream.

It stings more than—

“Mom?”

She sits up.

Joe and Carter and Kelly are awake. They're watching her in the dark. Joe's eyes are red. Kelly's are orange.

Carter's are violet, but he's in control.

"Hey," she says, trying to crawl out of the memory of the dream. "Are you all right? What's the matter?"

"He was here," Carter whispers.

Kelly nods, eyes wet. "We felt him."

And Joe says, "We can smell him. It's—" His eyes widen. "What's that?"

She looks down to where he's pointing.

In her hand is a wolf of stone.

The one she'd buried years before.

"Mom?" Joe asked. "Did he…?"

"I think he did." She wipes her eyes as she sets the wolf on the floor next to them. She opens her arms. Her children come to her, pressing their faces against her. They're big, her sons, but somehow they make it work. She sees Ox open his eyes, but he doesn't speak as he watches them. She says, "I had the most wonderful dream. Would you like to hear it?"

They all nod.

And so she tells them.

xxxii.

The sun rises on a new day.

Everyone is asleep again.

Surrounded by her pack, she watches the light begin to filter in through the window. It feels like healing. Or at least the start of it.

This pack is different than the ones that have come before.

She thinks it’s for the better.

And no matter what comes next, the world will hear their songs.

There will be peace. This she promises to herself.

Eventually, she picks up the stone wolf, tracing it with her finger.

“One day,” she whispers to it. “One day, my love. I will look upon your face, and all will be well.”

And though she thinks it’s just a trick of the early morning light, she swears the eyes of the stone wolf flash red.

end

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